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# Conversion, Revisionism, and Revision in Malcolm Cowley's *Exile's Return*

John D. Hazlett

Most readers of American literature think of Malcolm Cowley's *Exile's Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920s*<sup>1</sup> as the standard insider's literary history of that small group of expatriates who left the American "wasteland" to live in Paris in the 1920s. Fewer readers, however, are aware that the first edition, entitled *Exile's Return: A Narrative of Ideas*<sup>2</sup>, was a good deal more than this; it was also an excellent autobiographical narrative that followed Cowley and his friends on their ideological odyssey from bohemianism to Marxism.

Cowley himself is largely responsible for our current neglect of the first edition. In the Prologue to the revised book, he explained that the political opinions he held in 1934 had no place in "a narrative that dealt with the 1920s" (p. 12). But he went on, rather disingenuously, to point out that "while adding new episodes here and there, I have left most of the narrative untouched, out of a feeling that myself in 1934 had as good a right to be heard as myself today; when he went wrong I would rather have others correct him" (p. 12). The revised Prologue leaves the false impression that Cowley merely did away with a few rash political remarks ("There were not many in the book I wrote in 1934"—p. 12), and that the new episodes only expanded upon his original intentions. In fact, the ideological pilgrimage of the younger Cowley was almost wholly effaced from the 1951 text.

In retrospect, one can only assume that Cowley, like many other writers of his generation,<sup>3</sup> was embarrassed by his decade of Marxist enthusiasm,

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1. Malcolm Cowley, *Exile's Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920s* (New York, 1951). All subsequent references to this book will be given in the body of the article by page.

2. Malcolm Cowley, *Exile's Return: A Narrative of Ideas* (New York, 1934). All subsequent references to this book will be given in the body of the article by page.

3. The other notable example is Edmund Wilson, whose *American Jitters* (1932) was an attempt to combine contemporary national history and personal witness. Wilson's book,



and that this embarrassment, coupled with a national mood increasingly hostile to communism, had led him to perceive the view of history in *Exile's Return* as a literary flaw. His fellow-travelling days had already begun to be a source of irritation in the late thirties when he first considered discarding his Marxist "illusions" (as he reluctantly called them in a letter to Edmund Wilson). In spite of his increasing skepticism, Cowley had defended Russia and Stalin in the pages of the *New Republic* throughout the thirties, accepting, for example, the Party's explanation of the Moscow Trials and the Spanish Civil War. But he finally broke with the Communists, like many other fellow travellers, shortly after the signing of the Russo-German Pact in 1939.

Disillusioned with the Soviet Union and harassed by the House Un-American Activities Committee over a government appointment in 1941, Cowley suffered from a pervasive sense of guilt and resolved to have nothing further to do with anything political. He recalled his mood after leaving Washington: "I felt politically amputated, emasculated, but then I had never been happy among politicians. Now, with a sense of release and opportunity, I could get back to my proper field of interest."<sup>4</sup> That resolution appears to have had much to do with the spirit in which he rewrote *Exile's Return* ten years later.

The rationale offered by Cowley for his revisions reveals how political guilt led him to misperceive the real worth of his work. The 1934 edition was not solely about the twenties, as he claimed; it was also about the process by which the ideas and assumptions of the 1930s evolved out of the 1920s. By suppressing the self that had undergone that process and had emerged with a Marxist vision, Cowley seriously marred the coherence of the book. It was possible, of course, to omit the overtly political conclusions to which the narrative led, and so to reduce his "narrative of ideas" to a "literary odyssey." But such editorial surgery, however acceptable it may have made the text for readers in 1951, ignored the very assumptions upon which the story's coherence depended. Moreover, in effacing his earlier political perspective, Cowley took from future readers the opportunity to see how writers during the thirties thought about themselves and their immediate past.

When he wrote the first edition, Cowley saw his conversion to Marxism as a representative act. "One man is always representative," Cowley has said. "when he gives honest testimony about what he has felt and observed."<sup>5</sup>

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which was also reissued in the 1950s, is drastically altered in the updated *The American Earthquake* (1957), and his earlier, fellow-travelling self, like Cowley's, is silenced.

4. Malcolm Cowley, — *And I Worked the Writer's Trade: Chapters of Literary History, 1918–1978* (New York, 1978), p. 158. See also the chapters entitled "The Sense of Guilt" (pp. 133–52) and "A Personal Record" (pp. 153–60).

5. Malcolm Cowley, *The Dream of the Golden Mountains: Remembering the 1930s* (New York, 1980), p. xi.



As a result, he created what might be termed a "collective autobiography," one in which the conventional "I" narrator is subordinated as much as possible to a collective "we." In the first edition, this collective narrator is, in fact, used ambiguously. At times, the "we" represented the generation of writers who came of age with Cowley during the twenties, and the story was the narrative of their "odyssey" through that decade; at other times, the "we" is used in a Marxist sense, as when Cowley says that his was the story of "a whole social class" (p. 13).

During the twenties and thirties, many memoirists used one or the other of these notions of collective identity—the "generation" and the Marxist "class"—to reconstruct their historical selves. One may speculate, as in fact most of these writers did themselves, why the collective self had such an appeal. In part, it seemed to express a rebellion against the previous generation's romanticization of the individual ego. It also provided an explanation of the effects of new technologies which were destroying regional identities and creating what historical philosophers such as Jose Ortega y Gasset called the "masses." Cowley himself suggested a number of reasons why members of his generation thought of themselves as a group with a distinct identity, foremost of which was their common disillusionment with their elders' rhetoric during the First World War.

In *Exile's Return*, Cowley attempted to combine generationalist and Marxist ideas of identity to reconstruct the story of his representative "we" in spite of the fact that the assumptions of the former, as they were developed by European historians,<sup>6</sup> were largely incompatible with those of the latter. European generationalists, on the one hand, explained historical change as the result of overlapping cohort groups, whose respective periods of dominance, which were calculated according to the biological rhythms of human reproduction and the stages of the life cycle, were relatively short. Marxists, on the other hand, regarded much longer periods of time, based on the rise and fall of economic systems, as the most important temporal units, and classes as the most crucial social groups. So, in fact, Cowley's ambiguous use of the collective "we" also included an ambiguous temporal framework within which that "we" developed. On the one hand, the narrative covered the fifteen-year period from 1915 to 1930 when Cowley's generation came of age. On the other hand, when he stated that his was a story of "a whole social class, how it became aware of itself and how it went marching toward the end of an era" (p. 13)<sup>7</sup>, he was

6. For an overview, see Julian Marias, *Generations: A Historical Method*, trans. by Harold C. Riley (University, Ala., 1970).

7. In the revised version this has been changed to read: "the story of the American educated classes, what some of them thought about in the boom days and how they reached the end of an era" (10). The effect is of a general diminution of scope. The "whole social class" no longer achieves an awareness of itself. It is no longer a "whole" social class but only the "educated classes," and it has given up its purposive "marching," a crucial metaphor for Marxist writers in the thirties.



extending the temporal framework of *Exile's Return* to include the history of the bourgeoisie from its ascendancy in the late eighteenth century to its "inevitable" decline in the 1930s. This larger historical perspective is implicit throughout most of the 1934 edition, and it provided the rationale for such digressions as the lengthy historical background Cowley provided for the idea of "Bohemia."

In spite of the apparent incompatibility of generationalism and Marxism, Cowley managed to fuse them in the 1934 edition by adopting a relatively superficial version of the former, as expressed, for example, in Fitzgerald's stories of the twenties and the first essays of *The Crack-Up* (written a few years before Cowley's book). Since this form of generationalism made no claims as a serious historical method and contented itself with simply characterizing the style or look adopted by given generational groups, it was easily subordinated to Marxism which, as Cowley then thought, more adequately explained the forces which determined the important "half-unconscious attitudes" that "guided people's actions, the ones they lived and wrote by."

Moreover, underlying the differences between the generational approach and the Marxist one was the paradox that, in spite of their interest in the group rather than the individual, they both served to enhance feelings of self-importance in intellectuals who felt "outside" of history. Older, more "individualistic" notions of history claimed that outstanding leaders had a direct impact on the course of events, but such theories generally had little to say about the rank and file of humanity or about a common member of the literati, such as Cowley. Both generationalism and Marxism, however, tended to minimize the importance of the individual leader (even though both included notions of an "elite") and to emphasize the impact of more abstract forces—such as generationalism's *Zeitgeist* or Marxism's Dialectical Materialism. Because such forces expressed themselves through collective groups rather than through individuals, memoirists like Cowley by writing in the collective "we" could align themselves with an imagined *Zeitgeist* or the dialectical interpretation of history and thereby feel as if they were actually funneling history through their own personalities.

Such an exalted function, moreover, was perfectly suited to writers since it demanded nothing out of the range of their customary habits of mind. Their profession required that they keep abreast of new ideas; American Marxists and generationalists, with their reified notions of history, fostered the illusion that keeping abreast of collectivist ideas was equivalent to actual participation in the *Zeitgeist* or the dialectic that was shaping history. Their profession also demanded that they be observers of life; Cowley referred to the development of a "spectatorial attitude" among writers of his generation: "we ourselves were watchers. It did not seem that we could ever be part of all this." Alienation was, therefore, a kind of

occupational hazard for writers. Those who espoused ideas of collective identity and destiny, however, overcame this hazard by making observation, or, as they called it, "personal witness," itself an act of participation. Vincent Sheean wrote in his *Personal History* (1934): "The events that aroused in me the desire to attend, to witness, were invariably those in which large numbers of men were engaged in some difficult enterprise involving a fundamental idea—an idea of race, class or even of nation."<sup>8</sup> By personalizing, through observation, the acts of "large numbers of men," and the struggle over "fundamental ideas," memoirists such as Cowley and Sheean came to believe that they "belonged" to their times. For both writers, an individual who could "define his central reality" by understanding "his sense of exact position with respect to the multitudinous life of his species" had achieved the "sum of good."<sup>9</sup>

In memoirs like *Exile's Return* and *Personal History*<sup>10</sup>, the discovery of this "exact position" took the form of a conversion narrative. In Cowley's book, the conversion of the author from romantic rebel to intellectual Marxist revolutionary was projected onto the spiritual and political evolution of his entire generation. His "turning" became the representative turning of the age. When he looked back over his experience of the twenties from the vantage of 1934, he saw each act as a step toward what became the inevitable "move toward the left." This movement, while of interest in itself, was significant to Cowley only insofar as he believed it to be emblematic of the movement of Western history; it too was moving toward the inevitable crash of 1929 and the beginning of the new proletarian millenium. Those experiences, both personal and collective, that preceded the conversion were seen as symptomatic of the unregenerate state of a decayed culture; those that followed the conversion were infused with the hope of a new life of spiritual health and political salvation.

This belief in the importance of "personal witness" and Cowley's conversion to Marxism were unfortunately blurred by his revisions. Those that most seriously disrupted the conversion pattern include the deletion of: (1) An early section entitled "The Other Side of the Tracks"; (2) most of a section entitled "Political Interlude," which placed his analysis of what he called the "Religion of Art" in the larger context of the decline of Capitalism; and (3) the 1934 Epilogue, which explicitly stated Cowley's new beliefs.

The first of these deleted passages had been included as Part 5 of the first chapter, "Mansions in the Air." Cowley wrote it in response to a

8. Vincent Sheean, *Personal History* (Garden City, N.Y.), pp. 187–88.

9. Sheean, p. 262.

10. For examples of other memoirs in the same "conversion" mode, see Edmund Wilson's *American Jitters* (1932), Anna Louise Strong's *I Change Worlds* (London, 1935), and Joseph Freeman's *An American Testament: A Narrative of Rebels and Romantics* (New York, 1936).



reader's comment to the preceding section which had been published previously in the *New Republic*. The reader, Karl Pretshold, insisted that his proletarian experience was just as "typical" as Cowley's bourgeois life and charged that Cowley's view of their generation was distorted by class prejudice. Cowley responded by agreeing that Pretshold's experiences did, in fact, represent "the sound beginning of a [proletarian] culture during the decade before the War." Quoting at length from Pretshold's article, Cowley used that experience as a foil. Pretshold's "generation," was living "not five miles from where [Cowley] went to school," and it enjoyed a political and cultural life that contained all of the elements necessary for the salvation of his "lost generation." For example, Cowley in his Emersonian analysis of his own upper middle-class education complained of its superficiality:

In college we never got the idea that culture was the outgrowth of a situation—that an artisan knowing his tools and having the feel of his materials might be a cultured man. . . . Essentially we were taught to regard culture as a veneer, a badge of class distinction—as something assumed like a suit of English clothes or an Oxford accent, a uniform that made us citizens of a privileged world. (p. 35)

Pretshold's "generation," on the other hand, had grown up in a politically and culturally vital world. Marx's doctrines of economic materialism and the class struggle, Pretshold said, "were not meaningless to us. They checked against and helped explain the life we were seeing, experiencing. . . . All the books we borrowed and bought and read, all the lectures we listened to, were judged as they seemed to check against and explain and arm us for experience" (pp. 41–42). For Cowley, the continuity "between education and life" (p. 41) that Marxism appeared to promise, which apparently fulfilled the Emersonian vision of an organic American culture, was precisely the salvation toward which the "exiled" generation had to move. By placing Pretshold's account early in the narrative, he gave his readers a glimpse of the kind of "connected" life that was possible for those who allied themselves with the proletariat.

"Political Interlude," the second major section to be modified (pp. 223–42), traced the "radicalization of writers and intellectual workers" between 1926 and 1931. Ironically, it was not narrated in the direct autobiographical manner that characterized most of the earlier chapters, though it is clear that the experience he was writing about was close to his own. In part, the section intended to show the outcome of the political beliefs held by writers in the 1920s:

I shall not try to explain all the causes of this phenomenon [the politicalization of writers]. Some of them are related to international

events, and particularly to the enthusiasm aroused by the Five Year Plan; others are subsequent to the present narrative. . . . Yet there is a sense in which the whole movement toward political action grows out of the events I have been describing. It is the logical sequel to the opinions held by writers during the boom years, when they claimed to be wholly indifferent to politics. (p. 226)

But even more important, the section reveals how thoroughly Cowley's own ideas about the twenties were shaped by his conversion to Marxism. His analysis of modern literature hinged upon the belief that contemporary artists reflected an "atmosphere of the bourgeois society they were trying to evade" (p. 237) and were the product of a "theory of individualism that was already in full flight" (p. 238). When these "non-political" writers discovered that even the material prosperity promised by the capitalist system was a sham, they became radicalized:

They found that society was not a dull abstraction. . . . it was real, tangible and full of contradictions that were daily becoming more self-evident. . . here were social classes in conflict, sinking, rising, struggling to hold power or merely fighting for enough to eat. The owning class was consolidating its defenses. The industrial proletariat, which had been divided and dispersed by prosperity, was drawing together and rebuilding its class consciousness. (p. 241)

The literature and the "religion of art" which had arisen out of this culture were, necessarily, infected with its diseased individualism. In spite of "the great works of art and ingenious technical discoveries" (p. 151) that that religion had produced, it was "too dehumanized to nourish rich careers or to bring forth characters that compel our admiration" (p. 151).

The deletion of this analysis of the conversion experienced by writers after 1929 was accompanied by a significant change in the way Cowley portrayed their political attitudes before that date. The 1934 edition had insisted that the literary community had passively accepted the status quo in the twenties: "the writer of those days had a political philosophy which, though ingenuous, was fairly complete. He believed that all men's physical needs . . . could be satisfied within the limits of the existing system" (p. 224). Though Cowley qualified this by saying that writers continued to consider themselves "rebels," it is clear that his perception of their political views was largely determined by the logic of conversion, which, with its need for a dramatic alteration of values, required that his (and their) pre-Marxist period be portrayed as procapitalist. The deletion of the conversion, of course, made this "before and after" treatment superfluous, and Cowley left in only those portions of the original text that emphasized the hostility of writers toward society before 1929. For example, pages



227–29, which dealt with the writers' "revolt against modern society," were retained in the 1951 edition on pages 217–18; and pages 223–27, which were concerned with writers' conservative political values in the twenties, were deleted. Similarly, the revised version contains a new four-page section (pp. 218–21) on the Sacco-Vanzetti case which gives further evidence of the antiestablishment stance of writers in the twenties. In the 1934 edition, the significance of this traumatic political event was dismissed as relatively unimportant: "there was the memory of the Sacco-Vanzetti case which had stirred the intellectual public, but accidents like these were exceptional and might be prevented in the future by education, without changing the structure of society" (p. 224). One cannot assume, of course, that Cowley had originally emphasized writers' conservative political values merely for literary effect. A person who has undergone a conversion has adopted a narrative form to explain his past, and once that form has been chosen, it is inevitable that it should shape his perception.

The last section deleted in revision was the Epilogue, originally entitled "Yesterday and Tomorrow." In an almost confessional mode, Cowley acknowledged here that his narrative of the twenties was unsatisfactory, that the telling of "adventures," even with an implicit judgment, was not sufficient justification for his memoir: "Before ending the book I ought to explain, at least in bare outline, the beliefs that underlie or emerge from my own story" (p. 294). A self-interview followed which posed questions about the literary values of the present age. "Should artists devote themselves," he asks, "to art or propaganda?" (p. 294) And which side should artists choose in the class struggle? (p. 300). His answers revealed his belief that a new proletarian age was imminent and that artists ought to ally themselves with it. Capitalism, he said, "threatens the complete destruction of culture, since its inevitable and insoluble self-contradictions are leading it toward wars in which, tomorrow, not only books will be destroyed, but the libraries that contain them, and not only museums, universities, theatres, picture galleries, but also the wealth by which they are supported and the living people for whom they exist" (p. 301). An alliance with the workers, however, offers the artist something else: "Once he knows and feels the struggles of the oppressed classes all over the world, he has a way to get hold both of distant events and those near at hand, and a solid framework on which to arrange them" (p. 302). What Cowley was suggesting to artists is clear enough—not simply that they should form an alliance with the proletariat, but that they should embrace the ideology that places the class struggle in the context of historical dialectics, and that enables them to take the "long view"—to see clearly their own place in history and to "measure themselves by the stature of their times" (p. 303).

The completely rewritten Epilogue claimed that Marxism had, in fact, never seriously attracted the writers of the "lost generation": "Most of the

intellectuals who joined the Communist Party during the 1930s, then left it while blaming others for their mistakes . . . belonged to a somewhat younger group; they were the brilliant college graduates of the years after 1925" (p. 294). On the grounds that *Exile's Return* was not about this younger generation, he could insist that his earlier political views were irrelevant. As a result, he deleted not only those views but all of that political experience that he had initially projected onto his contemporaries. Exorcised of its Marxist spirit, the 1951 edition relied almost entirely upon generationalism for its historical method. To strengthen it, Cowley expanded his Prologue and enlarged his catalogue of the political, cultural, and social events that formed his generation's consciousness, adding a quotation from Fitzgerald's story "The Scandal Detectives" that expressed his generation's sense of "being different." In his recharacterization, Cowley asserted that his generation was rebellious, but essentially conservative: "Their social ideal, as opposed to their literary ideal, was the more self-dependent, less organized America they had known in their boyhoods" (p. 296). Cowley had already said this in the first edition, so it is not a conclusion that he reached only while revising; but in the earlier context he depicted the lost generation's nostalgia for an earlier America as politically regressive. In the 1951 version the narrator is reconciled to his earlier nostalgic and romantic self: "It seems to me now that many characters in the story, myself included, did very foolish things—but perhaps the young writers of the present age aren't young and foolish enough" (p. 12).

The decision to exclude his earlier Marxist perspective, however, only detracted from the book's coherence. Besides asserting the dubious proposition that Cowley's was not the generation that underwent the move to the left (numerous memoirs assert the contrary), the revision still relies for the depth of its insights on the remnants of a Marxist vision.

The additions to the book also seem oddly anomalous. Whereas each literary portrait in the first edition had placed the writer in relation to the political and economic situation, or to the general decline of capitalist culture, the new material on Pound (pp. 119–24), Cummings, Dos Passos, Wheelwright (pp. 158–60), and Hart Crane (pp. 227–34) is simple anecdotal reminiscence. Finally, the last third of the narrative, which had originally contained an account of the crucial political attitudes and events that led to Cowley's own conversion and statement of belief, has lost its connection to the preceding portions. In removing this material, Cowley apparently recognized a loss and interrupted his narrative:

. . . at this point . . . the author begins to disappear from his book. In the preceding chapters, although I was trying to tell the story of a generation of writers, I felt justified in recounting my own adventures



because they were in some ways representative of what was happening to others. That partly ceased to be true in the following years. My adventures were interesting to me, even absorbing, but . . . most of them had ceased to be representative; instead they were merely typical. As I think back on the period it seems to me that I am looking at a class or crowd photograph in which my face is lost in a mass of faces. (p. 207)

This disclaimer represents a remarkable denial of his past, considering Cowley's influential position as literary editor of the *New Republic* throughout the thirties. By suppressing his former political vitality, he denied the experience of many of his contemporaries as well and reduced a wonderfully audacious generational autobiography to a cautious literary reminiscence.

Because his development in the twenties had led to the Marxist view of history which informed the first edition, it was easy, once that view was judged to be inaccurate, for Cowley to convince himself that the self was less important than an "accurate" history and to justify the transformation of the book. In so doing, he made the literary figures of his generation the primary focus and diminished his own role. This refocusing, however modest it may have been, has unfortunately deprived us of an essential document of the temporary ascendancy of Marxism in American letters.